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Islam and we (me): Just random thoughts

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Panel: Islam and We

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Sherko Fatah (Germany)

Islam and we (me)

Just random thoughts

1.

Living in Germany, especially in Berlin, means to live together with a lot of Muslims (and nowadays their children and grandchildren) who came into the country during the fifties when after WWII, destroyed Germany was in desperate need of workers. Most of them are Turkish, but there are also many Arabs. You may know that Turkey is ruled by strict segregation of religion and state. Although most of the younger Turkish people in Germany are actually losing their roots, many of them are sympathizing with Islamic extremists. One has to keep in mind that this doesn't mean supporting terrorists. What I am talking about is just a common feeling amongst them, something like: "Ok, the terrorists may be wrong, but somehow they are near to me for the simple reason that they are Muslims." But nonetheless most of them are living peacefully, mainly as shopkeepers and craftsmen.

A few months ago in Berlin, a young Turkish girl was killed by her brothers. She had trouble with her family because she didn't want to be veiled anymore and started her training in electrical engineering. One evening her brothers lied in wait, shouted at her and shot her in the head. She died on the street and was found by pedestrians. Afterwards, we learned that her family had decided to kill her. This incident caused an upset in the German public. However, asked for their opinion, many young Turkish and Arabian males answered that this girl deserved it because she disregarded the rules of Islam and the rules of her family as well. I often wondered how that could be, because at the same time many of them are trying hard to be recognized as heroic underdogs of the (hip hop-style) urban jungle.

2.

When I visited Iraq last year, I had already heard a lot of things about the group of Islamic terrorists called Ansar-al-Islam. During the nineties they conquered some parts of the Kurdish territory in the North. There they built up some communities ruled by that special kind of Islamic law they are practicing. I'm not an expert on any kind of law so I can't say anything about that. All I can say is that they were known to be exceptionally cruel to their enemies. And from their point of view, they had lots of enemies. One time they killed more than a dozen young members of the Kurdish militia, called Peshmerga, by cutting their throats. They filmed the men dying and published the movie afterwards on the internet. Until they were wiped out by American special forces working with the Peshmerga, Ansar-al-Islam always had superior military equipment. Long before 9/11, they had a lot of international "visitors" in the large guesthouses in the center of their villages. The Kurdish people called them simply Afghans or Wahabits. Still, one of their operational bases seems to be in Germany.

3. (Putting some pieces together.)

I know, most of the things I've mentioned aren't related to Islam, but Islamic terrorism. With the rise of Al-Qaeda, everyone in Europe became aware of the threat. This happened just at a time when most of the people, in Germany for instance, realized that there were foreigners amongst them who are not guests anymore (people who are leaving after a while), but inhabitants. So right now the threat comes from within German society. Keeping in mind that the hijackers of 9/11 lived in Hamburg, Germany, it had become much harder to promote any kind of multicultural project under these circumstances. In Europe the many borders and different languages (and perhaps the lack of space) caused something like the everlasting idea of cultural purity. To me this is just an illusion. But for a certain kind of politician, it seems to be a useful tool.

Since I was a child, I have known about the peaceful facets of Islam. When I was in London this year, just three days after the first bombings of the tube, I stood in front of one of the closed subways. I don't know why, but suddenly I remembered myself thirty years ago in Baghdad looking at my aunt, who used to throw kisses to all directions while praying on her small carpet. Asked about this, she said there is one kiss for everyone she loves. And, believe me, there were a lot of beloved ones in her world.

There is one point I would like to draw attention to: watching the pictures of 9/11, it occurred to me that those who did this had realized the tremendous importance of media-pictures. Each of them from a middle-class background, I would call them some kind of MTV-Muslims. Influenced and to some extent educated by the so-called first world, they responded to the problem I've mentioned in the beginning, the gradual loss of their roots, in the most aggressive way. Maybe the main achievement of their ideological leaders was the creation of a new unifying concept of Islam which conceals all the other aspects of this religion and culture. For young people all over the world, whether they are wealthy or underprivileged, it provides a way to become part of a movement.

Though Islam may seem to be resistant, in my opinion what we are seeing is a cultural transformation. In Iraq, for instance, one of the problems after the fall of the dictatorship has become the internet. All over the country new technologies (also cable and satellite TV) are now available. But the older generation is deeply concerned about the torrent of all kinds of pictures they have to face now. This beginning of a new time means a break between them and later generations. And somehow it turns out to be similar to the slowly ongoing process in other parts of the world.

So, what needs to be talked about? In the Islamic world, I think the main question in the future will be how to balance transformation and tradition. And the Western world should come up with something beyond security issues, starting perhaps with communication.